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The Uprising

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"When people ask me what I mean by stable government, I tell them 'money at six percent'."

- General Leonard Wood, Military Governor of Cuba, 1900

Military planners and defense officials in Washington and Baghdad are widely reported to have believed that the recent war between the United States and Iraq would end in a general uprising by the Iraqi people. This surprising convergence of views between otherwise dissimilar adversaries has not attracted much comment, presumably because no uprising occurred. The Iraqi people did not swarm upon the invaders, drowning them in a river of blood, as Iraq's celebrated information minister, Muhammed Saeed al-Sahaf, insisted they would. Nor did they rise up in a final act of fury against the regime that had tortured and imprisoned them, as promised by the Pentagon-sponsored Iraqi opposition leader Ahmed Chalabi. Instead, Iraqi civilians seem to have done their best to stay out of the way of their own armed forces, whose disintegrating formations were magnets of destruction, as anyone could see. Conversely, most Iraqis greeted Coalition forces warily, perhaps from fear that any public sign of relief at Saddam's demise would put them at risk from remnant elements of the Old Regime, perhaps from natural apprehensions about what occupation and foreign rule would mean. All of which amounts to a generalized display of common sense, for which no explanation is required.

To Arms!

What may warrant some reflection, however, is the shared belief that anything else might have been possible: that common sense would be so overcome by insurrectionary enthusiasm that people would take their lives in their hands to help one side or the other. The belief that the "people in arms" are a uniquely potent military force—one constitutive of both military victory and political legitimacy—is a central element in the mythology of modern war, albeit one that has rarely been vindicated by events, and most certainly not in circumstance like those that prevailed in Iraq. That Saddam Hussein might have persuaded himself that his people would lay down their lives to save him is of a piece with the other delusional elements of his regime; a regime that, like all totalitarianisms, was calculated to deprive the Iraqi people of precisely those qualities of social cohesion and private initiative on which any such uprising would have had to depend. In strictly military terms there is a case to be made for an Iraqi attempt at mass mobilization against the invader. This was pretty much the worst-case scenario envisioned by Coalition planners, which is reason enough why it might have been a good idea for the other side. To attempt it, however, would have required Saddam to break down the elitist, Baathist-Tikriti monopoly on honors and offices by which his government operated day-to-day. People's war is almost by definition revolutionary war, and Saddam's was most decidedly a counter-revolutionary regime as far as Iraqi society was concerned. You cannot mobilize the people without also empowering them; or, at the very least, without creating expectations of empowerment that may prove awkward later on.

Similar questions arise with respect to an Iraqi uprising on behalf of the Coalition. Nothing remotely similar has ever happened before, anywhere. History records numerous examples of cooperation

between indigenous revolutionary or resistance movements and forces from outside. But the spectacle of a nation wholly lacking in organized opposition, spontaneously combusting to welcome and support an alien army from the other side of the world—it is simply unheard-of.

It is not easy to say what memories or imaginings may have caused otherwise hard-headed policy-makers to believe in such a thing. Old news-reels of American forces parading through the liberated villages of France in 1944 seem to have had something to do with it. So, too, did the evident American desire to see its intervention in Iraq vindicated by an outburst of plebiscitary violence, as a rejoinder to those members of the international community—the majority, indeed—who had refused to believe in the necessity of war at all. Yet the possibility that American policy might somehow be validated by the Iraqi people had already been foreclosed by the failure of earlier efforts to stir up rebellion among them. Some share of the sixty-odd mass graves so far uncovered by Coalition forces contain the remains of those who took up arms, at America's urging, at the end of Gulf War I. The ferocity of the retribution meted out by Saddam's henchmen on that occasion destroyed whatever organized opposition existed within Iraq's Shiite population, and should probably have been sufficient to quash any hopes of a repetition this time around.

Nevertheless, the United States is itself a post-revolutionary society, whose faith in the self-organizing power of the citizen-soldier is so deeply inscribed in the nation's political DNA as to constitute a kind of collective unconscious. For all the brilliance and professionalism of America's armed forces today, the supreme American warrior remains the Minute-Man on the bridge at Lexington, Massachusetts: an ordinary person standing up against injustice. If Americans are too ready to imagine that those suffering under tyranny can (and should) rise up weapon in hand, it is at least in part because they believe that their own ancestors have already done it.

Needless to say, the power of such ideas to distort policy choices is entirely independent of their historical merit. In the case of Operation Iraqi Freedom, at any rate, the impact appears to have been non-existent as far as military operations were concerned. If there was a single element of the Coalition war plan that comports with the requirements of a popular uprising, I cannot imagine what it could have been. On the contrary, it seems perfectly obvious that, had the Iraqi nation spontaneously taken up arms on its own behalf, the resultant thickening of the fog of war would have done nothing to aid the swift unfolding of Coalition operations. In military terms, the consequences of an Iraqi uprising would have been wholly negative: dangerous for everyone involved, and no help whatever to Coalition forces conducting tightly-integrated maneuver warfare of a kind in which hastily-organized popular forces can play no part.

Remember the Maine

The American readiness to believe in an Iraqi uprising was undoubtedly driven as much by political as by military considerations. Anyone contemplating the turmoil of the current occupation may well feel that, had the Iraqi people actually risen up against Saddam, some of the problems the United States and its allies now face in restoring order might have been mitigated. Still, one should not be too quick to assume that, had Iraq been liberated by Iraqis and Americans fighting side by side, the results would necessarily have been conducive to mutual trust and understanding. America's first venture in overseas intervention was conducted on just such a basis, with disappointing results for all concerned.

In 1898 the United States intervened in a war then underway in Cuba, by which indigenous revolutionary forces sought to wrest control of that island from its colonial master, Spain. Three years of fighting had produced inconclusive results, but significant casualties and much damage to Cuba's economy. American opinion favored the insurgents, owing to long-standing American dislike of European imperialism, and perhaps an instinctive preference for the underdog in a fight. It would at any rate be on that basis—as a campaign to liberate Cuba from Spain—that war would be justified to the American public. This point of view was embodied in the Congressional declaration of war itself, which included a proviso that affirmed Cuba's rightful freedom and independence, and disclaimed "any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over [the] island except for the pacification thereof."[1]

In private, the motives of President William McKinley's administration were less idealistic. Most of its members believed that the United States had a long-term interest in controlling Cuba, and that any effort to assist in the creation of Cuba Libre was misguided. All agreed that the chief American interest lay in a rapid resolution of the crisis, on any political basis whatever, provided Spain's position in the Caribbean was not taken over by some more capable European power. It was by way of expressing impatience over the continued unrest, plus a desire to make provisions for the evacuation of American citizens, should that become necessary, that it was decided to send the second-class battleship *Maine* on a port visit to Havana—a classic exercise in "gunboat diplomacy" that went sour a few weeks later when the *Maine* blew up at anchor, killing 266 men from a total complement of 354. The next day Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt declared the explosion "an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards," a conclusion that was immediately echoed by a hastily-convened Naval board of inquiry.[2]

The war that followed lasted just under four months. It featured the destruction of two Spanish fleets at American hands, successes that provided a decisive boost to those who wanted the United States to acquire a world-class navy, capable of supporting a more forward-leaning foreign policy. Theodore Roosevelt became a household name thanks to his part in the storming of San Juan Hill, an exploit that would help propel him into the White House three years later. At the end, the United States gained control of the last major remnants of Spain's once-great empire—Cuba, the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico—plus the Hawaiian Islands, which the United States annexed to support its new position in the Pacific; an imperial coming-of-age that Rudyard Kipling commemorated in his famous poem "The White Man's Burden."

Perhaps the least intended of the war's consequences was its impact on the stability of the region. McKinley's demonstration of the United States' power unsettled Latin American opinion, which to the surprise of nearly everyone in Washington had favored Spain, a distant but culturally familiar presence whose forcible displacement by a robust, entrepreneurial democracy was broadly alarming. Conservatives worried that the United States intended to export its democratic politics into a region still controlled by traditional oligarchies; while the young and left-leaning were dismayed at what seemed to them a vulgar American materialism, at odds with the romance and beauty of "Hispanicism." Their apprehensions were confirmed after it emerged that the United States was not prepared to turn Cuba over to its inhabitants as it had promised, at least not without reserving the right to intervene as needed "for the preservation of Cuban independence," and to maintain "a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty." These provisions, known as the Platt Amendment, were incorporated by reference into the Cuban Constitution of 1902, and they would hang over the island and its neighbors like a prophecy. For the next thirty years, intervention in Latin America would become something approaching an annual exercise for America's armed forces, who invariably found themselves supporting the interests of narrow economic elites against the claims of the impoverished masses—a role at odds with America's self-image and professed values, no doubt, but one that its leaders would claim had been forced upon them by local conditions. As one congressman remarked, by way of explaining the conditions that attached to Cuba's independence:

Our dominant purpose [in the war] was that of destroying a regime under which savagery flourished. … We have promised to Cuba peace, order, equal rights, security for life and property, justice, and material progress. Does any sane man believe that these results are likely to be attained by … surrendering the destinies of the island to the former insurgent leaders?[3]

A Message to Garcia

One of those leaders was General Calixto García, who briefly became one of the most famous people on the planet, thanks to an inconceivably popular pamphlet by a retired American newspaperman named Elbert Hubbard. Hubbard's essay, entitled "A Message to Garcia," makes odd reading now, combining as it does a lot of Social-Darwinian ranting against "the imbecility of the average man" with unreserved admiration for blind obedience to authority. In its day, however, it was reckoned to have outsold every other book save the Bible. García appears in the tale as a mysterious figure "somewhere in the mountain fastnesses of Cuba," with no role other than to be found by "a fellow named Rowan." For practical

purposes, Hubbard might have made him up. Yet García was a real person, and his story illustrates some of the misunderstandings that can occur between those who rise up and those who would come to their aid.

By the time President McKinley decided to get in touch with him, García had been fighting the Spanish for thirty years. He was not difficult to find, commanding as he did an army of 15,000 men in Cuba's eastern-most province, Oriente. His was the only Cuban force capable of anything other than guerilla operations. It was thanks to their efforts that American forces were able to land on the island without opposition—a circumstance that American observers found baffling, and which they would later attribute to Spanish incompetence.

Among Cuba's revolutionary leaders, García was reasonably well disposed toward American intervention. His comrade in arms, General Antonio Maceo, believed it was better to succeed or fail by one's own effort, rather than "contract debts of gratitude with such a powerful neighbor"[4]; while the revolutionary poet José Marti, killed by the Spanish a few years before, had demanded to know "once the United States is in Cuba, who will drive them out."[5] García personally doubted the motives of the McKinley administration, but calculated that American public support for Cuba Libre would suffice to ensure the island's independence. Once the Americans were ashore he offered to place his forces under U.S. command—a not inconsiderable increment to an expeditionary army that numbered just under 17,000, but one that the American commander, General William Shafter, declined to accept. Officially, the United States had embarked upon a policy of "neutral intervention" in Cuba, and Shafter was under strict instructions to avoid a gesture that might be construed as recognizing the Cuban revolutionaries as legitimate belligerents.

Shafter was nevertheless prepared to welcome García's services as volunteer. He and his men soon became heavily involved in the fighting around Santiago de Cuba, the decisive engagement of the war, culminating in the destruction of the Spanish fleet, which preferred to take its chances with the American blockading squadron, rather than fall unresisting into the hands of Cuban and American armies. Afterward, García's troops were forbidden to enter Santiago without first surrendering their weapons, a requirement that was justified as a provision to prevent looting and vendetta. Spanish officials in the city were retained in their posts, and García was not allowed to witness the Spanish surrender. "This war," Shafter helpfully explained, "is between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Spain."[6]

García was deeply affronted by the American treatment of his men, but especially by the reason that was given for it: "We are not savages who ignore the principles of civilized warfare," he wrote to Shafter. "We are a poor, ragged army, … but like the heroes of Saratoga and Yorktown, we respect our cause too deeply to disgrace it with barbarity and cowardice."[7] He then resigned from the Cuban army, explaining to his superior, Máximo Gómez, that "I am no longer disposed to continue … cooperating with the plans of the American Army, and I do not want it said that I disobey the order of my government."[8] Once General Shafter had departed Cuba, however, García calmed down sufficiently to accept an invitation to visit the United States from General Leonard Wood, the newly-appointed military governor, looking to make amends to an old warrior. Once again, things went badly. García took sick and died suddenly in Washington on December 11, 1898, one day after the war's official end. He was buried for a while in Arlington Cemetery, but that too did not sit right, so his remains were later disinterred and returned to Cuba.

The Politics of Memory

Among Cubans, the exclusion of Calixto García's army from Santiago would become one of the most famous incidents in the entire war. Sixty years later Fidel Castro could still refer to it without elaboration in his speeches, as an American politician might refer to Betsy Ross or Nathan Hale. To Castro, García's humiliation embodied American bad faith. He portrayed his own movement as the culmination of García's struggle, a claim of enormous emotional resonance, and not entirely unrealistic politically: after the war Spanish economic interests in Cuba drifted inexorably into American hands, and it was to defend those interests that American forces had periodically returned. Their last and most conclusive intervention came

in 1933, in aid of a coup d'état by Colonel Fulgencio Batista, the strongman whom Castro eventually overthrew.

In time, Cubans and others who chafed under America's looming presence in Latin America would come to regard its intervention as an act of opportunism, intended to prevent García and his comrades from gaining the fruits of a victory they had all but won on their own. That, of course, is not the way the Americans remembered it. Precisely because it was difficult to identify any vital American interests at stake in Cuba, America's war there would come to be regarded as an especially selfless act. The cause of Cuban independence may not have carried much weight inside the McKinley administration, but it was a genuinely popular with the American public. Tens of thousands of Americans volunteered to go fight, and while some were motivated by a thirst for adventure, many must have shared the outlook of the American poet Carl Sandburg, who joined up, he later recalled, because "I read about Gómez, García, Maceos, with their scrambling little armies … They became heroes to me. I tried to figure a way to get down there and join one of those armies."[9]

He did not succeed. Nor did most other volunteers, owing to the shortness of the war and the inefficiency of the American mobilization. The burden of the fighting was born almost entirely by regular American forces, over 5,000 of whom died in Cuba and the Philippines. All but a few hundred perished from accident and disease, true enough; yet the sacrifice was real, and so too was the resentment that arose when the anticipated gratitude was not forthcoming. "The American solider," one correspondent reported, "thinks of himself as a disinterested benefactor, and he would like the Cubans to play up to the ideal every now and then. … He does not really want to be thanked, and yet the total absence of anything like gratitude makes him furious."[10]

One of the most striking features of American eye-witness accounts of the war is their near-universal insistence that the Cubans would not fight. Many of these stories are difficult to read today, tinged as they are by the racism that was commonplace at the time. Nevertheless, racism alone cannot account for so many reports of Cuban troops failing to stand their ground, or to attack the Spanish with the ferocity and determination that the Americans expected of them. Such conduct was of course normal for the Cuban *insurrectos*, who had learned to survive and succeed by avoiding the enemy's strength, by striking a few blows and running away—the time honored tactics of the weak against strong. In this case the effect, after three grueling years, had reduced the Spanish position in Cuba to a collection of isolated garrisons based on the coastal cities. By the time the Americans arrived, Spanish logistics and communications throughout the island were already in ruins. This was a decisive contribution to victory, won at great cost, which the Americans did not witness.

Nor, given the absence of a unified command structure (ruled out, as García discovered, for political reasons), did they have much opportunity to recognize and appreciate the unfamiliar methods and outlook of their Cuban partners. To judge by his furious letter to Shafter, García expected that his American colleagues would be able to recognize, in his rag-tag army, the descendents of the Yankee irregulars who had fought the British a century before. But they did not. On the contrary: for most of its history the United States Army have been engaged in suppressing irregular forces precisely like those the Cubans employed against the Spanish. Professional American soldiers had learned to despise such methods as ineffective, and as symptomatic of moral cowardice.

The latter inference, which racial prejudice reinforced even if did not create it, would have enduring consequences, since it became the chief explanation for why Cuba could not simply be turned over to its inhabitants once the Spanish were gone. Cuba Libre could not yet be born, it was decided, because the Cubans had not earned it. They had not stood up. They were not ready. This was a conclusion the more easily reached because Cuban independence had never in fact been the goal of the McKinley administration, which had nevertheless embraced of the language of human rights and national liberation as a means of mobilizing support for the war. Cuba's perceived incapacity for self-rule, as revealed by the conduct of its warriors, allowed accounts to be squared with the American public, which had gone to war expecting to liberate Cuba, and found themselves signing up for a long-term lease instead.

The same explanation did not go down so well in Latin America, where the United States would be increasingly despised for having failed to keep a promise it had not quite made. Neither, however, did it wish to assume permanent responsibility for an island whose largely black and mulatto population had little in common—culturally, politically, or otherwise—with its American liberators. It was a predicament that was the more painfully felt for not having been foreseen. America had intervened in Cuba for the express purpose of "pacifying" the island. But what precisely did that mean? Senator Orville Platt, author of the American law that would abridge Cuban independence, soon discovered that this was the crux of the matter. By intervening in Cuba, he realized, the United States had become responsible not just for the welfare of the people who lived there, but for "the establishment of a government [that] we would be willing to endorse to the people of the world—a stable government, a government for which we would be willing to be responsible in the eyes of the world."[11]

This is the sort of problem that anyone contemplating intervention in somebody else's revolution would do well to ponder at length; for it almost goes without saying that the "you-break-it, you-buy-it" principle that Senator Platt found so disconcerting in Cuba continues to operate internationally. That its implications should have taken the United States by surprise a hundred years ago is perhaps understandable: the Spanish-American War was the first time the United States sent its armed forces abroad "in the name of humanity,"[12] as President McKinley insisted, only to find its own interests and reputation put at risk as a consequence. It would not be the last. In the meantime, the requirements of "stable government" remain as elusive as ever they were; and the stakes have only gone up.

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References

1. This language was adopted on the motion of Senator Henry M. Teller, following the failure, in the House of Representatives, of an earlier motion expressly recognizing Cuba's revolutionary government. It later became known as the Teller Amendment.
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